

Letters

Our heads are spinning this month with your tales of dodgy DVDs and disc licking, and accusations that we've taken our eye off the ball. Still, what do you expect when we don't even know what month it is?

WHY DITCH XP?



In your December 2005 issue you previewed Windows Vista, the version of Windows that's due to supersede XP in the second half of 2006. Your cover says "We reveal your top 10 reasons to ditch XP".

Let me summarise those reasons:

1. Vista is not a pain to install. This is hardly a reason for regular users to ditch Windows XP as they don't reinstall XP that often.
2. The Glass interface. In other words, it looks very pretty.
3. The scalable icons. It looks pretty if you have a really good big screen.
4. Support for auxiliary displays. It may support something that will look really pretty and maybe even sexy in the future.
5. Better backup. This is an improvement on XP, but not if you have already bought your own decent backup software.
6. An improved Start menu. You save 10 seconds finding the more obscure programs that you don't use that often.
7. Universal Access Protection. How is this different to what my firewall does?
8. Better searching and Virtual Folders. That is, it does what Google Desktop already does on Windows XP, although admittedly with Virtual Folders.
9. Internet Explorer 7. It does what Firefox already does on XP.
10. No more My Computer. Big deal.

Is that it? If Microsoft, computer retailers and magazines really want me to ditch Windows XP and buy an upgrade, it had better be bloody cheap or offer a lot more than these 10 features.
Niall Duffy

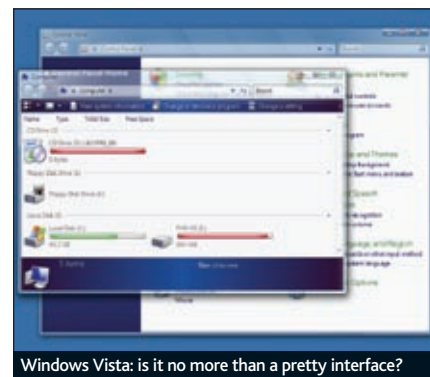
☞ You make some very sensible points, although you've perhaps misunderstood the significance of Universal Access Protection (UAP), which is one of the most important technical advances Windows Vista makes over previous versions. It will also have a very positive impact on users, as they will suffer less from problems such as spyware.

UAP is quite different from a normal firewall, although it protects your system against malicious programs such as spyware and viruses. One of the reasons spyware in particular is so prevalent is that most people log into their Windows PCs as administrators. It would be safer to do day-to-day computing as limited users, but this is very inconvenient. Limited users can't install software, for a start.

Windows XP programs have the same privileges as the user who runs them. When you are logged in as an administrator, you can do pretty much anything you want to the computer, including installing software, formatting hard disks and so on. You can also install spyware. In practice, Internet Explorer (which will also be running with the powers of an administrator) allows the spyware to install itself. If you were a limited user, Internet Explorer would also have limited abilities and could not install the bad software.

UAP enables you to run programs with the minimum necessary level of privileges. Even if you were logged in as an administrator, there's no reason for Internet Explorer to run with such powerful rights over the system. If it should temporarily need them, perhaps to integrate with a Browser Helper Object such as Google Toolbar, UAP will prompt for a password. This lets you see what's happening and prevent spyware secretly installing itself.

The other changes are certainly less impressive and, based on what we've seen, we'd hesitate to upgrade, too. Bear in mind, though, that we've seen only the first beta version, and further changes will certainly be made before the final release. We hope the interface becomes less confusing for a start. It may look nice, but some of the new ways in which Explorer works are not intuitive. Rest assured that we will continue to cover Windows XP for the foreseeable future.



Windows Vista: is it no more than a pretty interface?

TAPE OF GOOD HOPE

You've published several comments on transferring videos from tape to computer before, so perhaps you could clarify two things to do with copying audio tapes to CD.

First, when taking a line output from a quality tape recorder, would feeding this into a sound card give satisfactory results, or would it be better to use an external standalone audio box? If it's the latter, can you explain the quality difference and outline the connections I would need to make to the computer?

Second, my twin-deck CD player and recorder writes only to Audio CD-Rs. These are a pain to find, and Audio CD-RWs are worse. Is it possible to convert a standard CD-R to an Audio CD-R?

Ron Brake

☞ Copying audio tapes to a PC is easy. Connect your hi-fi's tape-out connector to your sound card's line-in socket with a good-quality cable. This will do the job admirably. A PC's line-level inputs can be quite noisy. A typical motherboard audio system might have a signal-to-noise ratio of less than 80dB, whereas a quality sound card or external audio box might top 100dB. But as tape is very noisy (with a signal-to-noise ratio of around 40dB to 50dB), you won't lose any quality with even a cheap card. You'll need some software such as the free Audacity from audacity.sourceforge.net (it's also in our cover DVD's Expert Toolkit) to record the sound and split it into tracks. Then you can use your CD writer's bundled software to burn a CD.

If you want to use a hi-fi CD recorder to record to standard CD-Rs rather than the rarer and more

WRITE IN – AND WIN!

Adobe has kindly agreed to give a bundle of its popular Photoshop Elements and Premiere Elements software to this month's star letter writer, furnishing Niall with a powerful graphics program familiar to professional graphic designers, as well as the top-notch video-editing package Premiere Elements 2.0. Photoshop Elements 4.0 lets you edit and enhance your digital photos easily and effectively, while Premiere Elements makes it simple to edit your own home movies like a pro.



PLUS! Every letter-writer also receives a *Computer Shopper* mug





expensive Audio CD-Rs, you need to modify the hardware. Consumer devices are deliberately limited to writing to Audio CD-Rs only and use copy protection to prevent anyone making further copies of the copies. Using a PC's CD writer is a much better idea.

However, if you happen to have a really old standalone CD recorder, you may be able to trick it into believing that a data CD is an audio CD. We've heard that you can trick pre-1998 Philips 870 and 880 models by ejecting the audio disc and replacing it with a data CD just before recording.

BUY THE BEST

I welcome and unreservedly commend your advice in November 2005's *Helpfile* to buy only quality brands of blank DVDs. I made the grave mistake of buying a cheap 25-pack spindle of DVD+Rs in 2004.

Writing to these discs took place without a problem but mysteriously, one year later, the discs became unreadable. This is true even when using several different drives and PCs.

I'm told that this is due to deterioration of the dye used to store the data. With today's increased file sizes, DVDs are commonly used for backups, but for this to be practical they must be reliable for a minimum of five to 10 years. I have used Philips, Maxell, TDK and Imation discs that have survived perfectly after three or four years in storage.

Your advice to use only quality brands is completely proven. I wonder how many other users have experienced similar deterioration from own-brand and cheap DVDs that appear perfect for several months after burning?

Steve Langley

It's a big concern. Writable discs are more vulnerable than regular CDs because the dye is light-sensitive. Readers should always make sure they treat recordable CDs and DVDs with at least as much care as regular CDs and DVDs. Keeping them in dust-proof sleeves or cases, preferably in a dark cupboard or filing cabinet, should reduce some of the risks.

To make sure your data can be read over a long period of time, it makes sense to check discs and even recopy them over a period of years. This is particularly important when popular data storage methods change.

We're reminded of the BBC's digital *Domesday Book*, a celebration of 900 years of record keeping. While our ancestors managed to preserve records of every one of the 13,418 settlements in medieval England, the BBC decided to store details of 1980s life on 12" laser discs using Acorn BBC computers. That data was unreadable after just 16 years due to the disappearance of both the video laser disc and Acorn BBC computer. Papyrus, as used by the ancient Egyptians, would have survived a little longer.

THAT PROBLEM'S LICKED

I frequently have problems with the *Computer Shopper* cover disc. It sometimes refuses to load and, when it does, it takes an age to do so, often crashing my computer when it completes its loading procedure. The November 2005 edition caused a serious Windows error notice to appear.

I have discovered that if I cover the business side of the disc with a liberal helping of saliva and

then wipe it dry with a polishing cloth, these problems are solved and all goes well. Fortunately, I never experience this problem with other magazine cover discs.

M Diddams

Other methods of cleaning troublesome CDs include using a can of compressed air, available from your local camera shop or Maplin, to blast dust from the disc's shiny side; or cleaning the disc in warm water with a drop of mild detergent. If that fails, we've heard that giving the disc a scrub with toothpaste can work. You need to use a paste, not a gel, and wipe from the centre of the disc outwards towards the edge. Whatever you do, don't scrub in a circular motion or you risk damaging the disc.

We've also received reports that silver polish and car polish works well. PressIT sells a CD Repair Kit that includes two different fluids to repair and seal 25 damaged discs. At £7.49 from www.amazon.co.uk it's not a bad deal, but readers with enough spit in their heads can save some money and do it the natural way.

FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE

I have read many times, usually in *Shopper*, that using more than one firewall can cause complete mayhem, a point that is obvious. Most of us know that if we install two different firewalls it's going to cause more headaches than a full weekend out on the booze.

Taking this into account, what about wireless routers and the like with built-in firewalls? Surely, if we have one of these and install a software firewall on the machines that access the router, there will be some kind of aggro on the way? After all, the traffic coming in and out of the router is filtered by the built-in firewall so, if there is a software firewall as well, the two will conflict somewhere along the line.

The answer to this will probably be something I already know – which is not to rely solely on the firewall built into the router. If this is the case, and they can't be relied on 100 per cent (or at least as much as a software firewall), why do the manufacturers of these routers charge consumers more cash for a product with a firewall built in than they do for one without?

Kieran White

If you run two software firewalls you may experience problems, but this is because two programs on your computer are trying to do the same job. Both are testing incoming network traffic and ensuring that only certain programs on your computer are allowed to connect to the internet. This can cause conflicts, but only because they are running on the same computer.

The firewall built into your router provides an extra layer of protection that should help, rather than hinder. As it works independently of your PC it won't create the same kinds of problems you would face when running two software firewalls. In fact, it provides some significant benefits.

Router firewalls are particularly useful when you need to run your PC without a software firewall, for whatever reason. Such situations arise when installing and activating a new Windows XP PC (if you don't have the Service Pack 2 edition), or any time your software firewall crashes.

If you allow other people to connect to your network, they might accidentally (or not) disable

COMPUTER SHOPPER

READER CONTACTS

LETTERS PAGE

letters@computershopper.co.uk

TECHNICAL ADVICE

helpfile@computershopper.co.uk

BUYING ADVICE

clinic@computershopper.co.uk

COVER DISC ENQUIRIES

computershopper_support@dennis.co.uk

SUBSCRIPTION ENQUIRIES

compshopper@cisubs.co.uk

or call 0845 126 0389

or visit www.subsinfo.co.uk

BACK ISSUES

Call 01789 490215

OTHER ENQUIRIES

enquiries@computershopper.co.uk

Technical and buying advice cannot be given by telephone

WRITE TO US AT

Computer Shopper,
30 Cleveland Street,
London W1T 4JD

SHOPPER OFFICE

Editor Paul Sanders

paul@computershopper.co.uk

Technical Editor Simon Edwards

simon@computershopper.co.uk

Reviews Editor David Ludlow

david@computershopper.co.uk

Commissioning Editor Lynley Oram

lynley@computershopper.co.uk

Consumer Editor Emma Winfield

020 7907 6260

Administrative Assistant Nicola Gibson

020 7907 6270

News Editor Paul Nesbitt

news@computershopper.co.uk

SHOPPER LABS

labs@computershopper.co.uk

Labs Manager Tom Royal

tom@computershopper.co.uk

Senior Staff Writer Simon Handby

simonh@computershopper.co.uk

Staff Writer Seth Barton

seth@computershopper.co.uk

Staff Writer Chris Fynamore

chris@computershopper.co.uk

Staff Writer Alan Lu

alan@computershopper.co.uk

CONTRIBUTORS

contributors@computershopper.co.uk

Mike Bedford, Steve Clack, Martin Cooper, Mel Croucher, Sam Ellis, Kay Ewbank, Mike James, MacBiter, David McKinnon, Chris Miller, Paul Mullen, Ben Pitt, Julian Prokaza, David Robinson, Janet Swift, Jon Thompson, Andrew Wand, Karl Wright



COMPUTER SHOPPER BUSINESS CONTACTS

SHOPPER OFFICE

Fax 020 7907 6304

Managing Editor Steve Haines 020 7907 6290

Production Editor Jane Goulding 020 7907 6295

Sub-Editor Amy John 020 7907 6298

Art Editor Colin Mackleworth 020 7907 6294

Designer Anand Parmar 020 7907 6292

Group Art Editor Bill Bagnall

PHOTOGRAPHY

Danny Bird, Carole Tuff and Lindy Duong at Mullis Morgan

COVER CD/DVD CONTACTS

Luke Walker 020 7907 6330

Graham Smith 020 7907 6335

ADVERTISING

Fax 020 7907 6600

Email ads.shopper@dennis.co.uk

Tel 020 7907 plus the four-digit number:

Group Advertising Manager Jonathan Kitchen 6616

Account Manager Ben Topp 6625

Senior Sales Executive Karen Cook 6642

Sales Executive Louise Antoniou 6620

Classified Sales Executive Zoe Overthrow 6669

New Media Director Dan Newman 6803

New Media Account Manager Fiona Stedman 6812

List Rental Nerys Church 6140

ADVERTISING PRODUCTION

Fax 020 7907 6066

Tel 020 7907 plus the four-digit number:

Operations Director Pete Wootton 6299

Production Executive Lawrence Brookes 6062

MARKETING

Tel 020 7907 plus the four-digit number:

Marketing Manager Claire Childs

Marketing Design Manager Alex Patrick

Marketing Production Controller Kerry Lambird

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Tel 0845 126 0389

Fax 01454 620080

Email compshopper@cisubs.co.uk

MANAGEMENT

Tel 020 7907 6000

Fax 020 7636 5668

Publishing Director John Garewal

Group Advertising Director Julian Lloyd-Evans

Circulation Director Martin Belson

Managing Director James Tye

Finance Director Brett Reynolds

Group Finance Director Ian Leggett

Chief Executive Alistair Ramsay

Chairman Felix Dennis

PRINTING

Printed by Herons, Maldon, Essex

Cover Printers Ancient House, Ipswich

Distributors Seymour Distribution,

86 Newman Street, London W1P 3LD

020 7396 8000

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International Licensing Director Richard Bean

Tel 00 44 20 7907 6136 Email licensing@denis.co.uk

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their firewalls. The router's firewall will still protect them in their folly. This in turn will protect you, because it will stop them catching and passing on one of the many Windows-based network worms.

If your network users are protected, your network is safer, so we recommend that you always use your router's firewall and check that no incoming ports are open. Unless you run servers, you shouldn't need to open any ports.

SOCKET TO 'EM

In the processors *Labs* test, *Shopper* January 2006, you say that an Athlon 64 will not fit into a Socket 754 motherboard. However, I have an Athlon 64 sitting in a Socket 754 motherboard I salvaged from an old shop-bought computer.

I intend to use this processor to build a new small form factor computer. Any recommendations would be greatly welcome.

Davie McIntyre

☹ We have to admit that our processor table oversimplifies matters a little. Socket 754 Athlon 64s were made, and there are still a few available,

but they're being phased out. Only one Socket 754 Athlon 64 was launched in 2005, compared with six new Semprons, which is AMD's primary Socket 754 range. All faster Athlon 64s and dual-core Athlon 64 X2s are available in only Socket 939 form. Because only Socket 939 supports a processor-integrated dual-channel memory controller, AMD's cutting-edge chips don't exist in Socket 754 form.

To build a small form factor (SFF) PC using your Socket 754 Athlon 64, you need to find a Socket 754 SFF barebones system to stick it in. These are not common, but the Shuttle XPC SN85G4 package is suitable. You can buy one for £189 including VAT from www.overclock.co.uk.

SPOT THE BALL

I just received my copy of the January 2006 issue of *Shopper* and find no review for the new video iPod. I find this surprising, considering Apple's share of the MP3 player market and the fact that the device will probably be the must-have product on many shopping lists. I'm sure your readers would appreciate your expert insight before rushing out to get one.

I note that you also reported in December's *Newsfile* that "Apple has so far declined to produce a video iPod, citing research that shows little consumer demand for such devices". It would appear that you didn't see this coming at all. Are all eyes back on the ball now?

Jon Colledge

☹ This apparent omission is largely down to the fact that our cover dates are somewhat out of sync with reality, rather than because we misjudged



Socket 754 Athlon 64s do exist, but they're being phased out

the market. Apple launched the video iPod in October, one week after we published the December issue. We reported that Apple said there was little demand for a video iPod, and it did. But then Apple launched a video iPod anyway. Just last month, in the January issue, we reported the launch of the device – at the first available opportunity.

It's interesting to note that at the time of launch, Apple boss Steve Jobs still thought that the new iPod's video features were not reason enough to buy one. He was more excited about the slimmer design and greater storage, describing the video capabilities as "a bonus".

As for reviewing it, we have. As soon as it was available we got hold of a video iPod and ran it through our extensive tests. You can read all about it on page 40.

BLIND DATES

Why is it that on 18th November 2005 I could buy your January 2006 issue? I find this most misleading. I picked up a copy in the past thinking that it is the current issue when it turned out to be well out of date. It seems to me that by the end of December, probably much earlier, the main contents are out of date. The reviews, adverts and so on are no longer useful.

Not only that, but the cover disc attraction of F-Secure 2006 needs to be installed before the 4th December to provide the 120 days' worth of protection.

I know your competitors do the same thing, and I suppose if you continue to try to keep one step ahead we can expect the January 2007 issue next August. Christmas comes but once a year, but starts in September.

Graham Bridle

Thanks for saying Happy Christmas in the January issue.

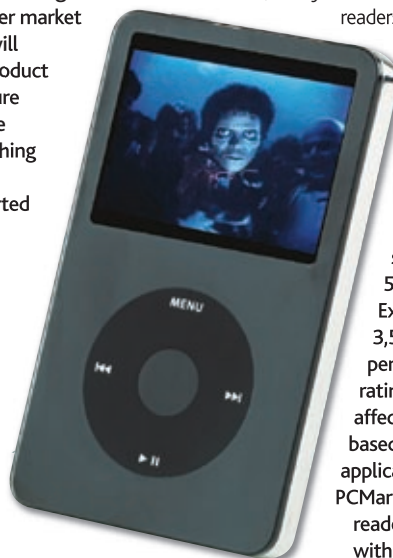
Philip Pickles

☹ The cover issue date can cause confusion, not least to us. Of course, as Philip points out, we should not have extended our season's greetings in the January issue. That would be ridiculous, because it's the February issue that comes out in December.

So, Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year readers! See you next issue (that's March 2006).

CORRECTION

There was an error in last month's PC Labs benchmarks page. The Carrera Vision Plus CS-01 PC's PCMark04 score was shown as an improbably high 5,234 due to a typing error in Excel. The correct score was 3,524. The published performance report and overall rating for the machine were not affected by this error as these are based on the *Computer Shopper* application benchmarks, not PCMark04, which we run only so that readers can compare performance with that of their current PC. You can download PCMark04 for free from www.futuremark.com/download/?pcmark04.shtml. ☹



▲ The new video iPod: Apple claimed there was no demand for it, but then launched the product anyway